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For Immediate Release

Ventura County Air Guardsmen bring fallen firefighter home to Northern California

Two of the pallbearers who brought the casket bearing the body of firefighter Steven Rucker into the cargo area of the California Air National Guard C-130 Hercules had fought alongside him as he defended a house from the Cedar Fire. Another two had served as his captains in the Novato Fire Protection District where he worked. Both later spoke of his character and said he had been an Eagle Scout.

The C-130 and its crew from the 146th Airlift Wing had traveled from Channel Islands Air National Guard Station in Port Hueneme to carry Rucker home to Northern California today, from Gillespie Field Airport in El Cajon to Sonoma County Airport in Santa Rosa.

Rucker died Oct. 29 during fires that devastated four Southern California counties, leaving more than 20 people dead, destroying more than 3,500 homes and burning 743,000 acres.

As the firefighters set the flag-draped casket down on the floor of the airplane, they wept. They turned and consoled one another as they prepared to return their fallen comrade to his wife and two children, his friends, family and colleagues.

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Air Guardsmen bring firefighter home

Tom Keena, who served as Rucker's captain in Novato and who was one of the pallbearers, said returning the body "gives closure to the folks back home. And it's good for the folks in San Diego, too."

The loss seemed to be felt across the fire-fighting community—and beyond.

Members of the local community lined the street outside the fence at Gillespie, some standing in their truck beds to get a better view, as hundreds of local, state and federal fire protection professionals saluted their fallen comrade and the procession taking him to the waiting airplane. On the sidewalk outside the fence a lone woman stood silently, holding a large American flag against her hip.

"The fire-fighting effort put out by these men and women was a heroic effort," said Rep. Duncan Hunter in a telephone interview. "They need to know that every Californian, every family has been made safer by the efforts of this hero."

Hunter's own Alpine, Calif., home was destroyed in the fires.

"This was a unique request," said Col. Steven D. Friedrichs, 146th Airlift Wing air commander and the pilot of the C-130. "It's not common for us to transport a civilian like this, but we were honored to do it.

"There's a special bond between the Guard and the fire-fighting and law enforcement communities, because many firefighters and police officers are in the Guard."

The bond might be especially strong between the 146th Airlift Wing and the public safety community because the wing is one of only four Air Force units across the nation that flies an aerial fire-fighting mission. Nearly two hundred airmen and eight C-130s from California, Colorado, North Carolina and Wyoming aided fire-fighting efforts on the ground in Los Angeles and

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Ventura Counties, making retardant drops against the Simi Fire Oct. 27 – 29.

The four wings have been assisting lead agencies such as the National Interagency Fire Center and the California Department of Forestry and Fire Protection for decades, but like many people engaged in the recent fire fighting, some of the California Guardsmen were defending their own neighborhoods and homes.

Many of the airmen involved in the fire-fighting mission call it the most satisfying they take part in. It's people helping people, they say. It's Americans helping Americans.

Monday, California Guardsmen were helping to honor a fellow Californian, and assisting at difficult time for his family and friends and fellow firefighters.

For more information contact 2nd Lt. Julio J. Bermejo,

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